REVIEWS

1. BIRDS OF THE INDIAN SUBCONTINENT by Richard Grimmett, Carol Inskipp and Tim Inskipp, 2011, Second Edition. Published by Christopher Helm, an imprint of Bloomsbury Publishing Plc., Oxford University Press, UK. Size: 21.5 cm x 14 cm, 528 pp. Paperback. Price: Rs. 875/-.

For almost 20 years, since its first appearance in 1983, the PICTORIAL GUIDE TO THE BIRDS OF INDIA AND PAKISTAN by Sálim Ali and S. Dillon Ripley remained the only field guide that covered almost all bird species of the Indian subcontinent. Despite its bulky and awkward size, and haphazardly numbered illustrations, it was a 'bestseller' of the BNHS and reigned unchallenged till 1998 when the authoritative BIRDS OF THE INDIAN SUBCONTINENT by Richard Grimmett, Carol Inskipp and Tim Inskipp was published. It was not a field guide, so, it did not make much difference to amateur birdwatchers. In 1999, the publication of a field guide, which they called POCKET GUIDE TO THE BIRDS OF THE INDIAN SUBCONTINENT revolutionized bird watching in India, despite muted protest by old timers who had lived for years on Ali's and Ripley's books.

The major drawback of the first edition of the POCKET GUIDE was that the authors had not only changed common names (some on trivial reasons), but also the classification. So, instead of having grebes and shearwaters in the first few pages, as in the 'standard' bird books, their book started with Nicobar Megapode and partridges/snowcocks as the first plate. Grimmett *et al.* had followed the taxonomy and sequence from the book DISTRIBUTION AND TAXONOMY OF BIRDS OF THE WORLD by C.G. Sibley and B.L. Monroe, Jr. (1990). Nomenclature was adopted from the book AN ANNOTATED CHECKLIST OF THE BIRDS OF THE ORIENTAL REGION by Tim Inskipp, Nigel Lindsey and William Duckworth. Therefore, Red Munia became Red Avadavat, Long-billed Vulture became Indian Vulture, and most interestingly woodpeckers, honeyguide and wryneck came after ducks! Sibley and Monroe's classification was based on DNA analysis, which proved that woodpeckers are close to ducks.

The animal classification follows a general pattern, with the most primitive species first (i.e. bottom of evolutionary tree) and the most advanced at the end (i.e. the top). Related species with common ancestry and shared characteristics are put near each other and illustrated for easy understanding of the evolutionary tree (dendrogram). How a honeyguide is more closely related to ducks than other birds was difficult to accept. But genetic studies sometimes give unexpected results. The case of close relationship of a hyrax and elephant is a well-known text book subject. Both are so different in shape, size and behaviour, but considered as evolutionary 'siblings'.

Besides the arrangement and sequencing of species/ groups that had confused many, another drawback of the earlier books of Grimmett *et al.* was distribution map of species. The maps were based on published and museum records, and not indicative maps based on continuity and availability of suitable habitat. In a vast Subcontinent like ours, with very limited bird recorders, most distribution maps are location points of ornithologists/birdwatchers than the actual distribution of a particular species. Absence of a recorder does not necessarily mean absence of a species, particularly if a suitable habitat is still present. This is especially true for migratory waterbirds, which can be found in any suitable wetland (admittedly some are found only in north India, for example Greylag Goose, while others in the whole country). In such cases, it is reasonable to give general indicative distribution maps.

In 2005, Pamela C. Rasmussen of Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC, and a student of late Dr. S. Dillon Ripley published BIRDS OF SOUTH ASIA: THE RIPLEY GUIDE in two volumes. Volume I being a Field Guide and volume II covers Attributes and Status. This brought back the old classification to which many of us were used to. She also revived many subspecies/races into full species, and identified many cryptic species, based on morphology, distribution and songs. The criticism was that most of her 'new' splits (species) had not been described in detail in peer-reviewed journals so how could one accept the taxonomic change. The criticism is valid up to a certain extent, but we must appreciate that her suggestions were a challenge to all to prove or disprove her. Many papers published in SYSTEMATIC NOTES ON ASIAN BIRDS have proved that Pamela is correct.

Leaving aside the taxonomic debate, I will come back to the book under review. The second edition is a vast improvement with 226 colour plates, 73 more than in the first edition. In the first edition, some plates were irritatingly crowded with illustrations. For example, plate 71 of the POCKET GUIDE had 33 illustrations describing sitting and flight postures of five species of eagles and hawk-eagles, while in the new book the same species are described in two plates: three species of eagles are shown in 17 illustrations on Plate 45 (p. 128), and four species of hawk-eagles are shown in 17 illustrations on Plate 46 (p. 130). Based on taxonomic splits given in Pamela's book, two subspecies of Changeable Hawk-eagle have been described as full species: nominate

Changeable Hawk-eagle *Nisaetus limnaeetus* and Crested Hawk-eagle *Nisaetus cirrhatus*. Please note that the earlier generic name of hawk-eagles was *Spizaetus*. The other species illustrated on Plate 46 is that of Mountain Hawk-eagle, now in two forms: the nominate *Nisaetus nipalensis* of northern India, and *Nisaetus kelaarti* or Legge's Hawk-eagle of southern Western Ghats, which is a smaller bird. Other plates in the new edition are also less cluttered.

Almost all the plates have been re-composed, so now there are not more than 5-6 species per plate (including various postures, age and sex-related differences if any). As the authors write in the Introduction "many species and even a few families or groups have been repainted for this edition. Species texts have been significantly increased for almost all species, and the maps have been completely revised."

I must admit that although the maps have been considerably improved in the second edition, there are still many twists and turns, and enigmatic gaps in the polygons to make one comfortable. With extremely limited data of such a large number of birds in such a large and diverse country, producing good distribution maps of Indian birds is a real challenge. Additionally, we have destruction of forests and grasslands (destroying habitat of some species, while increasing habitats of others), destruction of natural wetlands and creation of artificial waterbodies, due to dams, reservoirs and canals, unpredictable weather and climate change – all of which are changing the distribution pattern of many peripatetic species. New information is not reflected on maps based on old museum records and published papers. Increasing popularity of bird watching in India and use of internet, facebook and twitter to report sightings has increased the scope of recording. A good photograph has now replaced specimen collection. What we urgently need is to publish distribution atlas of the birds of India. Till this is done, most of our field guides will have confusing distribution maps.

A total of 1,313 species have been described in the Indian subcontinent. Adding the number of potential splits as full species, this book describes 1,375 species – formidable task indeed. Printing and other production quality is top class. Earlier POCKET GUIDE had numbers below the illustrations while in this book, species names have been given, which further enhance the quality and usefulness of the book. I wish Peterson's patented arrow marks can be 'unpatented' so we all can use them in illustrated guides as a quick pointer to the characteristic features to look for in the field before a confusing green-pigeon or a *Phylloscopus* warbler flies away. In the bird rich forests of India, we all have cursed ourselves for missing the clinching characteristic feature – for instance noting everything except one feature that separates the Chestnut-crowned Bush-warbler *Cettia major* from the Aberrant Bush-warbler *Cettia flavalivacea*.

For 14 long years, the POCKET GUIDE (1999) was my field companion (along with Pamela's book from 2005) even when it was tattered and the book was held in place with a rubber band! Getting hold of this marvelous book is an un-describable pleasure, at home and in the field. At least for some years, I will not have to use a rubber band to keep the pages in place. I am sure before my second edition reaches that stage the third edition, with improved maps, will be in the market.

■ ASAD R. RAHMANI

2. TOWARDS CONSERVATION AND MANAGEMENT OF MANGROVE ECOSYSTEMS IN INDIA, 2011. Edited by J.R. Bhatt, D.J. Macintosh, T.S. Nayar, C.N. Pandey, B.P. Nilaratna. Mangroves for the Future (MFF) India & IUCN, India. Size: 25.5 cm x 17 cm, 280 pp. Hardbound. Price not mentioned.

Viewed in the not-so-distant past as hostile swamps, mangroves are recently looked upon by most people as wetlands worth conserving, being both a valuable ecological and economic resource. Nevertheless, despite this change in perception mangrove destruction continues unabated even today at alarming rate, the major threats being urban development, aquaculture and over-exploitation of fishery resources.

A number of books and reviews on mangroves are available. In fact, even a superficial survey of the current scientific literature indicates that research on systematics and ecology of mangrove ecosystems is steaming ahead at a rapid pace. Most of this literature deals with various aspects of biology, structure and functions of mangrove forests covering systematics, floristics, community structure, species diversity, species composition across salinity and soil types. While such a flow of information is extremely important to understand mangrove forests, a timely account on the information gaps, reviews on site-specific conservation activities and actual implementation of various research outputs in mangrove conservation is a need.

With this background, a two-day workshop on 'Conservation and Management of Mangrove Ecosystems in India – Stakeholder Consultation for Assessment of Training and Capacity Building Needs and Design of National Strategy and Action Plan' was held in February 2008 at GEER Foundation, Gandhinagar, Gujarat. The delegation included a wide range of audiences from the government to NGOs,